DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 435 001 CE 079 187

TITLE	Literacy and Learning Strategies. Ensuring Universal Rights to Literacy and Basic Education. A Series of 29 Booklets Documenting Workshops Held at the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education (Hamburg, Germany, July 14-18, 1997).
INSTITUTION	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, Hamburg (Germany). Inst. for Education.
ISBN	ISBN-92-82010-89-9
PUB DATE	1999-00-00
NOTE	10p.; For other booklets in this series, see CE 079 178-206.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: <http://www.education.unesco.org/uie>.
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Proceedings (021)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Basic Education; *Adult Literacy; *Developing Nations; Economic Development; *Educational Needs; Empowerment; Foreign Countries; Functional Literacy; Informal Education; Integrated Curriculum; *Learning Strategies; *Literacy Education; Needs Assessment; Position Papers; Role of Education; Teacher Student Relationship

ABSTRACT

This booklet, which was produced as a follow-up to the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education, examines literacy and learning strategies. After a brief overview of the workshop from which the booklet emerged, the new convivial approaches to literacy that are being developed through experimentation in many developing countries are described. The learner- and community-based approaches fuse literacy and empowering processes through a single, well-structured participatory methodology. Presented next is a discussion of the importance of basic needs and productive work support that advocates the following: (1) developing activities that respect local knowledge, promote on-the-job training, and relate to people's contexts and cultures; (2) developing an understanding of the pedagogy of the informal sector; and (3) using an integrated approach linking competencies for economic survival with the social equipment for greater effectiveness at the local level. Concluding the booklet are the following four steps toward putting participatory ideology into action: (1) decentralize the creation of books and programs; (2) promote basic learning needs through nonformal strategies; (3) recognize that in addition to reading and counting skills, adults also need functional skills to be self-reliant and productive in local economic development; and (4) promote communities' own knowledge and learning traditions. (MN)

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ED 435 001

A series of 29 booklets documenting workshops held at the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education

3b Learning strategies

Literacy and learning strategies

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This publication has been produced by the UNESCO Institute for Education within the context of the follow-up to the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA V), held in Hamburg in 1997.

Readers are reminded that the points of view, selection of facts, and the opinions expressed in the booklets are those that were raised by panellists, speakers and participants during the workshop sessions and therefore do not necessarily coincide with official positions of the UNESCO or of the UNESCO Institute for Education Hamburg. The designations employed and the presentation of the material in this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the UNESCO Secretariat concerning the legal status of any country or territory, or its authorities, or concerning the delimitations of the frontiers of any country or territory.

Theme 3: Ensuring universal rights to literacy and basic education
Booklets under this theme:

3a Literacy in the world and its major regions
3b Literacy and learning strategies
3c Literacy, education and social development
3d Literacy research, evaluation and statistics
3e Literacy in multilingual/intercultural settings
3f Literacy and technology
3g Literacy for tomorrow

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ISBN 92 820 10 89-9
Design by Matthew Partridge, Hamburg
Printed by Druckerei Seemann, Hamburg
1999

Foreword

In July 1997 the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education was held in Hamburg, organised by UNESCO and in particular the UNESCO Institute for Education, the agency's specialist centre on adult learning policy and research. Approximately 1500 delegates attended from all regions of the world, with representatives of 140 member states and some 400 NGOs. In addition to the work of the commissions and plenary which debated the official documents of the Conference The Hamburg Declaration and The Agenda for the Future, there were 33 workshops organised around the themes and sub-themes of the Conference.

As part of its CONFINTEA follow-up strategy, the UNESCO Institute for Education has produced this series of 29 booklets based on the presentations and discussions held during the Conference. The recordings of all the workshops were transcribed and synthesized over one year, edited, and then formatted and designed. A tremendous amount of work has gone into this process. Linda King, coordinator of the monitoring and information strategy for CONFINTEA, was responsible for overseeing the whole process. Madhu Singh, senior research specialist at UIE, undertook the mammoth task of writing almost all the booklets based on an analysis of the sessions. She was helped in the later stages by Gonzalo Retamal, Uta Papen and Linda King. Christopher McIntosh was technical editor, Matthew Partridge designed the layout and Janna Lowrey was both transcriber and translator.

The booklets are intended to draw out the central issues and concerns of each of the CONFINTEA workshops. They are the memory of an event that marked an important watershed in the field of adult learning. We hope that they will be of use both to those who were able to attend CONFINTEA V and those who were not. We look forward to your comments, feedback and continuing collaboration with the UNESCO Institute for Education.

Paul Bélanger,
Director, UNESCO Institute for Education, Hamburg
and Secretary General of CONFINTEA

Literacy and learning strategies

Introduction

There has been a stagnation in learning strategies used in literacy programmes world-wide in recent years. There is indeed a huge gap in adult literacy between discourses and learning strategy. Although, ideologically speaking, terms such as "self-esteem", "participation" and "solidarity" have been plentiful in adult literacy programmes, in reality most literacy programmes continue to pursue traditional strategies for disseminating reading and writing skills.

The demand for new strategies and reassessment of the notion of literacy stems from the fact that both governmental and non-governmental adult education programmes have made little impact on improving people's living conditions. In most less developed countries, poverty is increasing.

The workshop on "Literacy and learning strategies" held during the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education, had the important task of looking for new participatory strategies, learning from other methodologies and considering people as the basis of a new educational agenda. The panel consisted of Catherine Stercq, Collectif d'Alphabétisation, Belgium; David Archer, Action Aid, UK; and Enrique Pieck, Colegio Mexiquense, Mexico. The chair of the session was Luis Benavides, Centro International de Prospectiva y Altos Estudios, CIPE, Mexico.

New approaches are being developed from field practices in several parts of the world. Pilot projects are being conducted and then spread to different countries through a wide range of grassroots organisations and NGOs. Even government programmes are experimenting with new approaches which are being developed by international agencies. Of course these approaches need to ensure a continuing process of innovation and renewal. This can only be attained through networks of practitioners and exchange of information.

The workshop highlighted the need for adult basic education to start with the learners' community and environment. Rooted in their culture, learning should aim at forging links with others and broadening intercommunication.

New convivial approaches to literacy

New approaches to adult literacy and empowerment are being developed through field experimentation in many developing countries. The crucial aspect of such programmes are dialogue, ownership and linking adult literacy with other development activities. Dialogue is the centre stage of such approaches. Literacy is a collective task of converting the graphics. This provides structures for dialogue, without constant intervention by the facilitator. The fact that learners construct their own materials means that they take ownership of the issues that come up – which would be impossible to achieve using set primers. Because people construct their own maps, the themes are naturally related to their immediate reality. This leads to immediate local action and a stronger link between literacy programmes and other development activities.

With respect to empowerment such programmes promote: self-realisation; increased ability to analyse; increased ability to solve problems; increased ability to articulate ideas; increased participation in community organisations; formal positions of responsibility in community organisations; community level action to improve local conditions such as constructing grain-stores, diversifying crops, co-operative buying or selling, re-grading access roads and other items of infrastructure, school repairs, water pipes, and action in the environmental or health spheres. Evaluations have shown that such programmes also result in better resource management at an individual and household level. There are marked improvements in gender relations: for example, men taking on domestic work. There is increased health awareness and improvements in education: for example, increased enrolment of children, and many parents opening new schools.

Learner- and community-based approaches involve a literacy process and an empowering process. The literacy gives people practical skills which help in the empowerment process, and the empowerment process in turn creates uses for literacy in people's everyday lives. The approach fuses the two processes through a single, well-structured participatory methodology.

The importance of basic needs and productive work support

The widespread poverty within developing countries calls for learning strategies which prioritise the survival needs of marginalised people.

Traditionally, emphasis has been placed on literacy and basic education as the main activities within adult literacy. This serves to isolate adult literacy from strategies and methodologies that consider people's needs and daily concerns. This irrelevance of content explains the failure of many educational programmes. Traditional approaches are mostly based on universal educational models geared to stereotypes of the adult population. Many failures could be explained by the fact that official pedagogy bore little relevance to the way people learn.

Against a background of poverty and economic recession, adult learning presents an opportunity to foster social and economic integration, encouraging and strengthening local development. This calls for an integration of productive aspects into adult learning: to go beyond the academic rationale towards the needs of work, production and social and economic inclusion. It is necessary to link adult education to ongoing activities and to develop training programmes that respect local knowledge, promote on-the-job-training and relate contexts to people's contexts and cultures. Learner's diversity must be given utmost priority.

It is necessary to understand the pedagogy of the informal sector. Adult literacy strategies should be linked to economic activity and the way people learn: people's own pedagogies, rooted in their experiences. Strategy should relate to the way people tackle their own projects. People's own learning processes should be taken into account in designing strategies, as should native and informal knowledge for meeting survival needs.

Participation is the source of a collective learning process. This entails a fostering of social and economic projects in different sectors: housing, community, shops, workshops and craft production enterprises. The projects support each other by sharing experience and valuable knowledge on which they depend.

To improve learning effectiveness means understanding people's needs. It is necessary to integrate adult learning that provides competencies for economic survival with one that provides social equipment for greater effectiveness at the local level. An integrated approach is one which links the technical and the social competencies.

Many lessons can be drawn from these observations when considering ways to change institutions so that they respond to people's on-going activities while providing complementary educational and financial support. There is need to respect the individual and the community and encourage a learner-centred strategy.

Conclusion

The participants in the workshops came to the conclusion that it is more important to support individual and community development, and greater economic and political participation of adults, than it is to focus on standardised learning using set primers. It was emphasised that adults are motivated to learn reading and writing once they realise that these are important tools for communication, for expressing their needs and demanding their rights. Active participation in creating adult learners' own texts and graphics has been a significant factor in promoting self-confidence and self-worth – and so laying a foundation for future learning.

The workshop participants suggested four steps towards putting participatory ideology into action:

- decentralising the creation of books and programmes;
- promoting basic learning needs through non-formal strategies;
- recognising that reading and counting are not enough. Adults need functional skills to be self-reliant and productive in local economic development;
- promoting communities' own knowledge and learning traditions.

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The CONFINTEA logo, designed by Michael Smitheram of Australia, represents the lines on the palm of a hand. These lines are universal and yet different for each subject. They celebrate cultural diversity and the joy of learning.

Theme 3

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